

THE BLOODHOUND GANG IN

The Case of the **SECRET MESSAGE**



by **SID FLEISCHMAN**

illustrated by William Harmuth

THE CASE OF THE Secret Message

When the Bloodhound Gang finds a purse containing a secret message, everybody in town seems to want it. . . .

Mr. Big didn't bother to knock.

He filled the doorway, a stout man with pale blue eyes. His double chins had double chins. He was followed by a bodyguard with a squashed nose.

"Let's have it," Mr. Big growled. "Hand over the purse."

"We don't have it," said Vikki. "Mrs. Frimple picked it up about ten minutes ago."

Mr. Big's face reddened with anger, and he sliced the air with his walking stick. "Tear this place apart!" he commanded his bodyguard. "Find it!"

The Bloodhound Gang in

The Case of the
SECRET
MESSAGE

by Sid Fleischman

illustrated by William Harmuth

Random House 

Children's Television Workshop

The Case of the Secret Message is based on a series created by Sid Fleischman for the Children's Television Workshop.

Copyright © 1981 Children's Television Workshop. *The Case of the Secret Message* is a 3-2-1 Contact book produced by Random House, Inc., in conjunction with Children's Television Workshop. 3-2-1 Contact is a trademark and service mark of Children's Television Workshop. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:

Fleischman, Albert Sidney. The Bloodhound Gang in the case of the secret message. SUMMARY: After cracking a secret message, the Bloodhound Gang tracks down a smuggling ring.

[1. Mystery and detective stories. 2. Smuggling—Fiction]

1. Title. PZ7.F5992Bp [Fic] 80-28469

ISBN: 0-394-84764-4 (trade); 0-394-94764-9 (lib. bdg.)

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Contents

1 • The Stolen Purse	7
2 • The Secret Message	15
3 • The Knock at the Door	22
4 • Mr. Big	29
5 • Breaking the Code	35
6 • The Tan Car	40
7 • Tennessee Bay	45
8 • Good-bye, Mr. Big	55

CHAPTER 1

The Stolen Purse

Vikki was running.

At this hour of the morning the green strip of park along the river had the look of an outdoor gymnasium. Joggers and runners charged along in broken file. Others leaned against tree trunks to stretch and limber up.

Vikki wanted to get in five miles before going to work. She wore running shorts trimmed in orange and a white T-shirt. In black letters across the back it read:

BLOODHOUND DETECTIVE AGENCY

*Whenever there's trouble,
we're there on the double.*

She maintained a steady long-legged stride. At sixteen, she was taller than most of the boys her age. If she had once felt awkward and self-conscious about it, she now dismissed the matter with a snap of her fingers. She couldn't bother her head with things beyond her control. And she now regarded it as childish to base friendships on feet and inches.

Still, she couldn't help noticing that the boys were beginning to catch up fast. Especially Ricardo, who was a year younger and already as tall as she. The third member of the Bloodhound Gang didn't count. Zach was only ten.

She had tried to get them to run with her, but Ricardo preferred to sleep in. And Zach saw no point in running—unless someone was chasing him.

She had covered almost three miles. Squirrels scattered from her path and birds darted through the trees. A familiar voice broke through the sound of her breathing.

"Hey—Bloodhound!"

She saw Ricardo farther along the path. He had set up his tripod and camera mounted with a telephoto lens.

"Has there been an earthquake?" Vikki shouted.

"No, why?"

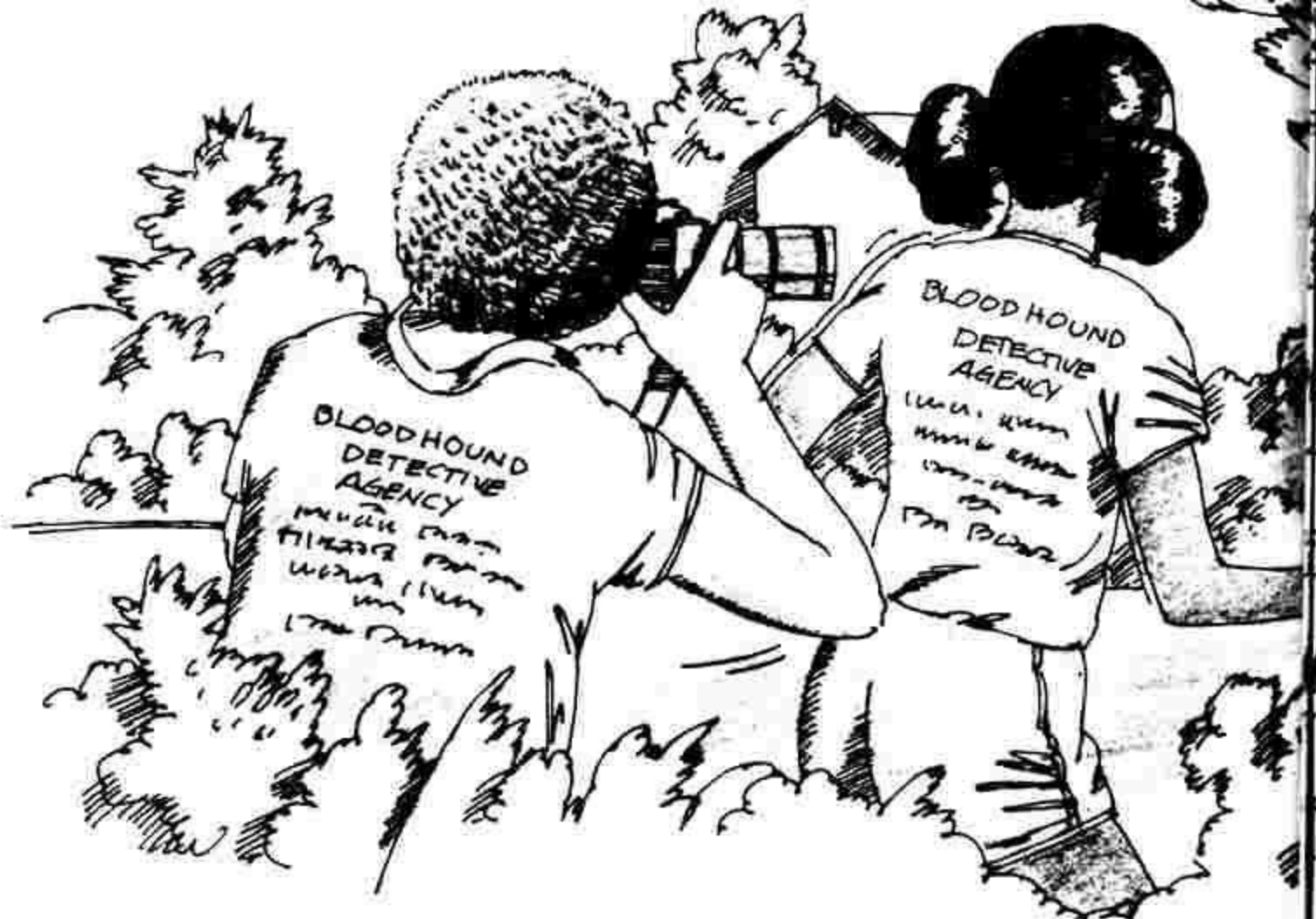
"I can't think of anything else that would get you out of bed this early."

"Any sacrifice for my art," Ricardo remarked airily. He too was wearing an office T-shirt, a gift from Mr. Bloodhound to the Bloodhound Gang. "I thought Mr. B. would like a picture of his running billboard."

"Well, I'm not going to break stride to pose."

"Who asked you to? I want an action shot. Keep running. I'll focus on your back."

She passed him by. After a moment she heard the faint clicks of the camera. She was hardly aware of the shabby woman in



old shoes with run-down heels on the path ahead. But quite suddenly a man appeared from behind a tree, as if waiting in ambush. He rushed up behind the old woman.

"Hey!" Vikki yelled.

In a flash the man ripped the old lady's handbag from her grasp and took off. The gray-haired woman set up a wail and tried to run after him.

"Stop! Thief!"

The purse snatcher was cutting across the park toward the street and the early



morning traffic. The old lady could do little more than hobble along in her run-down heels.

Vikki turned to shout back at Ricardo. "A purse snatcher! Come on!"

In a matter of seconds Vikki caught up with the woman.

"Bloodhound Detective Agency! We'll catch him!"

She raced across the lawn after the thief. Ricardo gathered up the tripod, threw it against his shoulder, and followed. But the

camera equipment slowed him down.

The thief darted through the trees, never looking back. All Vikki could see of him was faded jeans, a faded blue sweatshirt, and a neck as long and as scrawny as a plucked chicken's.

When he reached the street he barely paused for traffic. Vikki hesitated, waving Ricardo on. Then she crossed and poured on a burst of speed.

The thief sprinted along the empty sidewalk. His ears had turned red as tomatoes. A flat-footed running style, Vikki noticed. He was getting winded.

"Purse snatcher! Stop him!" she yelled out.

He turned his head with a look of surprise that he hadn't shaken her.

Ricardo hadn't crossed the street; he had gained some distance by following the edge of the park.

The purse snatcher ducked down a narrow side street lined with parked cars

and trash cans. He looked back again. The long-legged girl was gaining on him. His face was flushed. He hesitated—and then tossed the purse into a trash can.

That stopped Vikki.

“Hey, punk!” she shouted. “Ripping off an old lady—that sure took guts!”

The thief, loping away, tossed back a weary frown. Unheard, a camera shutter tripped open and shut. Ricardo had jammed the tripod in the grass and focused down the narrow street. He had caught the purse snatcher on film.

Vikki dug into the trash can and plucked out the old black handbag. She was glad to see the clasp still closed. The sneak thief hadn’t had time to paw through it.

Once again Ricardo gathered up the tripod. He crossed the street and met Vikki at the corner.

“I got him,” Ricardo said. “Full face shot.”

“Terrific,” Vikki gasped. For the first time

she realized she was out of breath. "Now, where's the old lady?"

"She was somewhere behind me."

They glanced back across the street to the park. The gray-haired woman, wearing steel-rimmed glasses and a long, shapeless old sweater, was waving to them.

Then a dark limousine pulled up beside her. Two men leaped out the doors, grabbed the woman roughly, and pitched her into the car. The doors slammed, the engine revved up, and the limousine sped away.

Vikki's eyebrows took a leap. "Hey!"

"She's being kidnapped!" exclaimed Ricardo.

"Get the license!"

"Got it."

"Me too."

The license plate read: MR BIG.

CHAPTER 2

The Secret Message

The young detectives returned to the upstairs office of the Bloodhound Detective Agency.

Ricardo called the police and reported everything that had just happened.

Vikki opened the black handbag and shook the contents onto the desk. A plain white envelope fell out.

"What else is there?" Ricardo asked.

"That's all there is," Vikki said.

"Just an envelope? There ought to be some identification."

Vikki nodded. "Ought to be, but isn't." She turned the purse inside out. She felt

the sides in the event something was concealed in the lining. Nothing.

Ricardo picked up the envelope. "Blank."

"I can see that. And sealed."

Ricardo held the envelope up to the sunlight streaming through the window. "There's something inside. A letter, I guess."

"Think we ought to open it?" Vikki asked.

"It may be addressed to that old lady."

"There's no stamp. So it wouldn't be exactly as if we were opening someone's mail."

"Right," said Ricardo. Carefully he began to peel open the sealed flap.

At that moment the door opened and Zach came gliding in on his skateboard. He saw that Vikki was in shorts. "What happened? Did your pants shrink up?"

"Wise guy," Vikki said with a distracted air. "Zach, get on the radio. See if you can turn up any information on a Mr. Big."

"Mr. Big? What kind of case are we on?"

"Let's just say it looks like a *big* one."

Zach ambled over to the CB radio, snapped it on, and picked up the microphone. "Breaker one-two, breaker one-two . . ." he said.

Ricardo withdrew a folded sheet of white paper from the envelope. He opened it up.

"Blank, Vikki. Both sides."

For a moment their eyes met in baffled wonder. "It doesn't add up," Vikki said finally. "Why would a woman walk around with nothing in her purse but this? A blank sheet of paper sealed up in a blank envelope?"

"It must add up to something," Ricardo answered. "Why would those guys kidnap a shabby old lady?"

Vikki snapped her fingers. "Maybe it wasn't the old lady they were after. Maybe it was this blank piece of paper."

"Secret writing?"

Vikki nodded. "Secret writing. Must be.

I'm going to call Mr. Bloodhound. He knows all about that stuff."

While she dialed the phone, Ricardo snapped on the desk lamp and heated the paper against the light bulb.

Zach's voice droned on. "Breaker one-two. Doesn't anyone have their ears on? This is Private Eye."

A voice erupted from the CB radio. "Go ahead, breaker."

"This is Private Eye looking for an I.D. on a Mr. Big. Any info, you guys? Give me a holler."

Vikki turned from the phone. "Thanks, Mr. Bloodhound. Hang on a minute." She caught Ricardo's attention. "He says if the invisible writing was done with lemon juice, heat will bring it out."

"I know that one," Ricardo replied. "But it's not working. Or this blank paper really is blank."

Into the phone Vikki said, "It must not be lemon juice, Mr. Bloodhound. Is there



anything else we can try? . . . Salt water? I'll call you back if that doesn't work."

She took the sheet of paper from Ricardo and laid it flat on the desk. Then she pulled open a drawer and chose a pencil. She tested the lead for softness.

"That ought to do it," she declared.

"Do what?"

"Mr. Bloodhound says you can write secret messages with strong salt water. The writing appears when you scribble with a soft pencil."

She laid the pencil point almost on its side and began shading in the left side of the sheet with long strokes.

"See anything?" Ricardo muttered.

"Don't get anxious."

"I *am* anxious."

"I sure hope the police find the old lady," said Vikki, scribbling away.

"We reported it right away, didn't we? They ought to be able to trace the license. Unless it's a phony."

"The purse snatcher was no phony."

"I'll develop the film and hand a print over to the cops. That ought to cure him of grabbing purses. I caught him full face with the telephoto lens."

A ghostly image was beginning to form through the pencil strokes on the paper.

"See that?" asked Vikki. She felt a quick surge of excitement. There *was* a message.

"You've hit it. Keep going."

"It looks like the number ten." Vikki had to stop to sharpen the pencil. Then, hurrying, she shaded in the rest of the page. Faintly, the balance of the secret message appeared.

10 SE BAY
8/25 1930

CHAPTER 3

The Knock at the Door

Vikki and Ricardo gazed at the coded message.

"Can you make any sense out of it?" she murmured.

"Ten . . . S . . . E . . . Ten . . . S . . . E. Beats me. It's going to take time to break the code, Vikki."

"I'll think about it in the shower. I've got to dash home and change. I won't be long."

Vikki returned in less than half an hour, wearing jeans and a pumpkin-colored turtle-neck. Zach was still at the CB radio. And Ricardo was studying the message intensely, as if it were a school test.

"I think I've got part of it," he said, looking up. "Ten . . . S . . . E. It could be a direction. Ten southeast."

Zach turned suddenly from the radio.

"Sounds like Tennessee to me."

"What does?" Vikki asked.

"Ten . . . S . . . E. Tenn-ess-ee."

"Hey—I think you've got it!" Ricardo blurted out. "What took you so long? Sure, Tennessee!"

Vikki looked puzzled. "Tennessee Bay? Is there a place like that around here?"

"Never heard of it," said Ricardo.

Vikki crossed to a wooden cabinet and rummaged around. She withdrew a large rolled-up area map and spread it on the floor. "Let's start looking," she said.

Zach began to take quick notes as a fast-talking voice broke in on the CB. Finally Zach said, "Thanks for the comeback, Invisible Man. This is Private Eye wishing good numbers on you."

He leaped up to face Vikki and Ricardo.

"Got it! Guess who Mr. Big is? A big-time smuggler. Yeah, runs a smuggling ring. Dangerous. His real name is Aces."

"Smuggles what?" Vikki asked.

"Jewels. Stolen stuff, I guess."

"Tennessee Bay," Ricardo said. "Do you suppose—"

The phone rang.

Vikki snapped up the receiver. "Bloodhound Detective Agency," she said hastily. "Whenever there's trouble, we're there on the double. Mr. Bloodhound isn't here. Victoria Allen speaking."

She fell silent, listening, then looked darkly at Ricardo and Zach. Finally, taking a deep breath, she muttered, "Yes, sir. We'll expect you, Mr. Aces." She hung up.

Ricardo and Zach gave her wide-eyed looks.

"Mr. Aces?" Ricardo whispered. "Mr. Big in person?"

"He claims to be that old lady's nephew. He's coming right over. For the purse."

"Gulp," Ricardo said.

Vikki shrugged off a sense of impending danger. "Let's roll up the map and duck it out of sight. We'll seal another piece of paper in the envelope."

The Bloodhound Gang went into action. Zach returned the map to the cabinet. Vikki used office paste to reseal the envelope and stuffed it back inside the purse.

"What'll I do with the real message?" Ricardo asked.

"Just hide it!"

There came a knock at the door. The Bloodhound Gang froze, barely exchanging glances.

"Mr. Big . . ." Vikki whispered.

Ricardo swallowed hard. "He sure got here fast." In a slight panic, he looked for a place to hide the exposed message. Then he crushed it into a ball and poked it into the mouth of a skull yellowed with age that was sitting among the relics of Mr. Bloodhound's cases.

"Come in," Vikki called out.

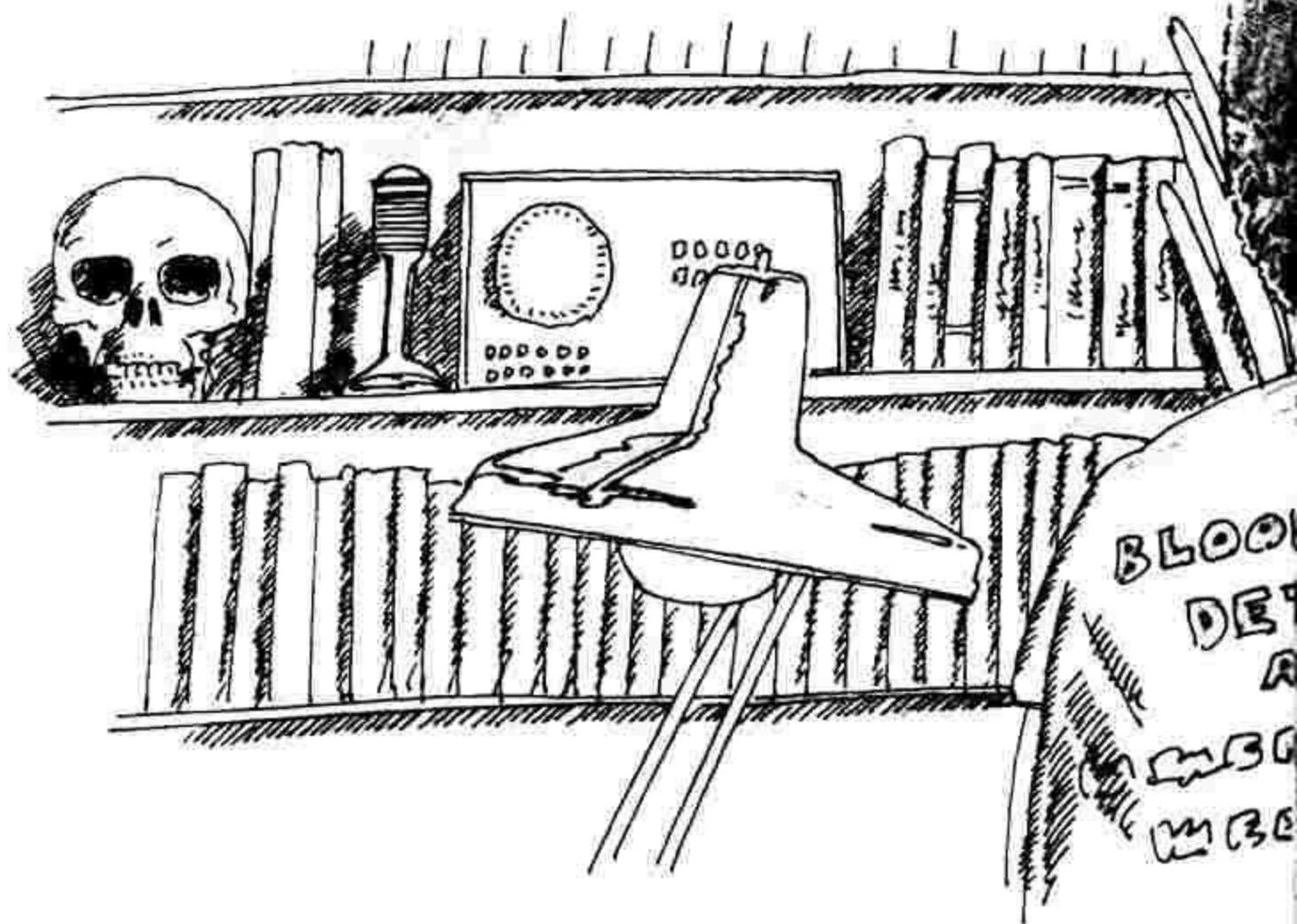
The door opened.

The shabby gray-haired woman in run-down heels walked in.

"Ah, there you are, my dear," she said, recognizing Vikki. "What a courageous young lady!"

Vikki was caught almost speechless. "But-but . . ."

"I'm Mrs. Frimple," said the old woman, adjusting her steel-rimmed glasses. "And I see you recovered my purse from that scamp."



"But, Mrs. Frimple, you were *kidnapped!*"
Vikki exclaimed.

"Me? My stars, what gave you that idea?"

"But I saw . . ."

"Who'd want to abduct me? No, no, my dear. Mrs. Frimple is just fine—never better."

She smiled, picked up her purse, and returned to the door.



"Thank you, my dears. All of you."

And she was gone.

Ricardo shook his head in stunned bafflement. "Did I just see what I just saw?"

"She's putting us on," said Vikki, after a moment's thought. "Her story's fishy. She escaped. And she came back for the message."

Zach gave a small whistle. "Wait till she discovers you slipped her a blank piece of paper!"

CHAPTER 4

Mr. Big

Mr. Big didn't bother to knock.

He filled the doorway, a stout man with pale blue eyes. His double chins had double chins. He was eating a candy bar and carrying a gold-handled walking stick. Once through the doorway, he was followed by a bodyguard with a squashed nose and hands in leather gloves.

Mr. Big raised the walking stick like an overweight fencer and pointed at Vikki.

"Let's have it," he growled.

"Have what?" Vikki tried to smile. "Do you have an appointment?"

Mr. Big glanced at his bodyguard. "Knuckles, give 'em my card."

"Which one, boss?"

"Pick any one!"

The bodyguard dug through his pockets and came up with an assortment of business cards. He began shuffling through them. "How about Ace Reducing Saloon?"

"That's 'Salon,' stupid."

The bodyguard kept shuffling through the cards. "Ace Exterminating Company, Ace Jewelry Corporation, Ace Model Airplanes . . ."

"Never mind," Vikki remarked. "You must be Mr. Ace."

"Mr. Aces," the heavy man corrected her. "Hand over the purse."

Vikki was doing her best to play it cool. "How is your aunt?"

"All shook up. Can't leave her room. Come on, kid, I'm in a hurry."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Aces. We don't have the purse."

Mr. Big waved his cane in the air. "Don't give me that! Anything happens on the

streets and I get the word. Fast. You got the purse."

"*Had* it," Ricardo put in.

"Mrs. Frimple picked it up about ten minutes ago," said Vikki.

Mr. Big's face reddened with anger. He flashed a hard look at Knuckles.

"You told me the old lady was—"

"These punks are lying, boss."

Mr. Big sliced the air with his walking stick. "Then tear this place apart. Find it!"

The cane swept a shelf, accidentally knocking the skull to the floor. A crumpled piece of paper flew out of its mouth. Mr. Big spied it with his sharp little eyes.

"Well, well, what have we here?"

The Bloodhound Gang held its breath.

"Oh, that," said Ricardo an instant later. "Just trash, sir. We use that old skull for a wastebasket." He bent down to retrieve the wad of paper.

But the tip of Mr. Big's walking stick got there first. Using the cane like a golf club,

he putted the ball of paper toward his bodyguard's feet.

"Pick it up, Knuckles."

"Right, boss."

"Now hand it to me."

A moment later Mr. Big had opened the crumpled paper. After a quick look, he stuffed the message in his pocket and peeped at the Bloodhound Gang. The cold blink of his eyelids gave Vikki a quick chill.

Knuckles tugged at his leather gloves. "Want me to take care of 'em, boss?"

Mr. Big finished off the candy bar,





crushed the wrapper, and flicked it aside. He shook his head. "Naw—just a bunch of numbers. And a bunch of kids. What do they know? Come on."

He led Knuckles to the door. He stopped and turned for a final look at the Bloodhound Gang.

"Forget about all this, understand? Unless you'd like Knuckles here to fit you for new shoes."

"Shoes?" Zach muttered.

"Cement shoes. Courtesy of Ace Cement Company. And a swim in the river. Courtesy of Ace Funeral Homes. Get it?"

"Got it," Vikki muttered. And then she added with a mocking smile, "Have a nice day."

CHAPTER 5

Breaking the Code

"Have a nice day?" Ricardo groaned. "His idea of a nice day is to visit the morgue."

"Oh, he's a pussycat," Vikki said, turning to the cabinet.

"A pussycat with claws like meat hooks."

Vikki withdrew the map. "Now, where were we?"

"Didn't you hear what he said?" Zach put in. "He said *forget* it."

"We don't take orders from cheap hoodlums."

"How about expensive ones?" Ricardo remarked. "He's got more businesses than the yellow pages."

"Ah, here it is," Vikki exclaimed, her fingertip on the map. "Tennessee Bay. Looks about thirty miles south of here."

Now what were the rest of those numbers?"

"Vikki, I think we ought to turn this case over to Mr. Bloodhound," Zach persisted.

Ricardo gave a defiant shrug. "Naw. *We're* detectives, aren't we? Vikki's right. Let's get on with it. A crook is a crook."

"And a code is a code," Vikki said. "We'll call Mr. Bloodhound when we break it."

"Eight," Ricardo said.

"What?" asked Vikki, as if his mind had begun to wander.

"The next line of the message. It started with an eight."

Vikki snapped her fingers. "Of course. Right. Eight twenty-five."

"Sounds like the time," said Ricardo.

Vikki sat at the desk and picked up a pencil. "But it had a slant in the middle. Like this." On a pad she wrote:

8/25

"Got it!" Ricardo exclaimed. "That's the way you write a date."

"Eight twenty-five." Vikki looked up. "Hey—that's today's date. August twenty-fifth."

Ricardo smiled. "That explains it."

"Explains *what*?" asked Zach.

"Why Mrs. Frimple and Mr. Big were in such a hurry to lay their hands on the message. Some crime is going to happen—today."

Vikki gave a quick nod and held the pencil poised over the note pad. She searched her memory for the last set of numbers in the message.

"Got it," she muttered, and jotted down four numbers.

1930

"Nineteen-thirty," Ricardo said, reading the pad upside down. "If that's the year, the crime was committed more than fifty years ago. Doesn't make sense."

Vikki leaned back in the desk chair. "It can't be the year. Let's think it through. If

you were planning a crime, and sending a message, what would you write? The place . . .”

“We’ve got that,” said Ricardo.

“The day . . .”

“We’ve got that.”

“The hour . . .”

“That we *don’t* have,” Ricardo declared.

“Boy, are you guys dumb!” Zach joined in. “That’s the way they tell time on ships and stuff.”

“What is?” asked Vikki.

“With numbers like nineteen-thirty.”

“Great, Zach. But what time does it make?”

Zach began to enjoy being one-up on Vikki and Ricardo. “You don’t start over again at noon. One o’clock is thirteen hundred hours. Two o’clock is fourteen hundred hours. And so on.”

Ricardo picked up on the system. “Then you subtract twelve noon from nineteen-thirty—”

"And get seven-thirty. Seven-thirty *tonight*."

She grabbed the phone and dialed. After a moment she said, "Hello, Mrs. Bloodhound. We're onto a case that might interest Mr. Bloodhound. What? . . . Oh . . . Well, never mind. We can handle it. No, there's no danger. But we're going to have to raid the office petty-cash box for bus fare."

All eyes were on her as Vikki hung up. She gave Ricardo and Zach an unruffled smile. "Mr. B. had to catch a plane. Looks like we're on our own."

Ricardo winked reassuringly, inflated his cheeks, and mimicked Mr. Big.

"A bunch of kids. What do they know?"

"What we don't know is exactly what's going to happen tonight," said Vikki.

Zach mused aloud. "Ships . . ."

"And smuggling," Ricardo added.

"Must be it," Vikki nodded. "At Tennessee Bay!"

CHAPTER 6

The Tan Car

It was late afternoon when the Bloodhound Gang boarded a southbound bus out of the central station.

By then Ricardo had developed the roll of film shot that morning in the park. He had brought along the prints, still slightly damp, and passed them around.

"Check out this shot of the back of your T-shirt."

"Right on. The letters are razor sharp."

"But look, Vikki. You can make out Mrs. Frimple ahead of you on the path. Of course, she's a little out of focus."

Vikki studied the picture carefully. "I'd say she's out of focus in more ways than

one. She's not one of your run-of-the-mill little old ladies. Escaped from Mr. Big's goons like a regular Houdini. And then tried to make us believe she'd never been kidnapped at all."

"Yeah, she's mixed up in this caper somehow."

Then Ricardo handed over a close-up of the purse snatcher. "How's that for a mug shot?"

"The police will love it," Vikki replied. "Look at all those gaps between his teeth. Like a picket fence. He's practically behind bars."

"What time is it?" Zach asked.

Vikki glanced at her watch and did a moment's figuring. "Almost sixteen-thirty hours."

"We're going to be awfully early."

"That's the idea," said Vikki. "To get there long before Mr. Big, settle in, and wait."

Ricardo, burdened with his camera bag,

nodded. "He's bound to be careful not to be followed. But we'll be way ahead of him."

The city receded block by block, and after a while the bus began working its way through the beach towns. Zach, who had never been this way before, kept shifting his gaze from the side windows to the broader back windows. That way, the sights didn't zip by so quickly.

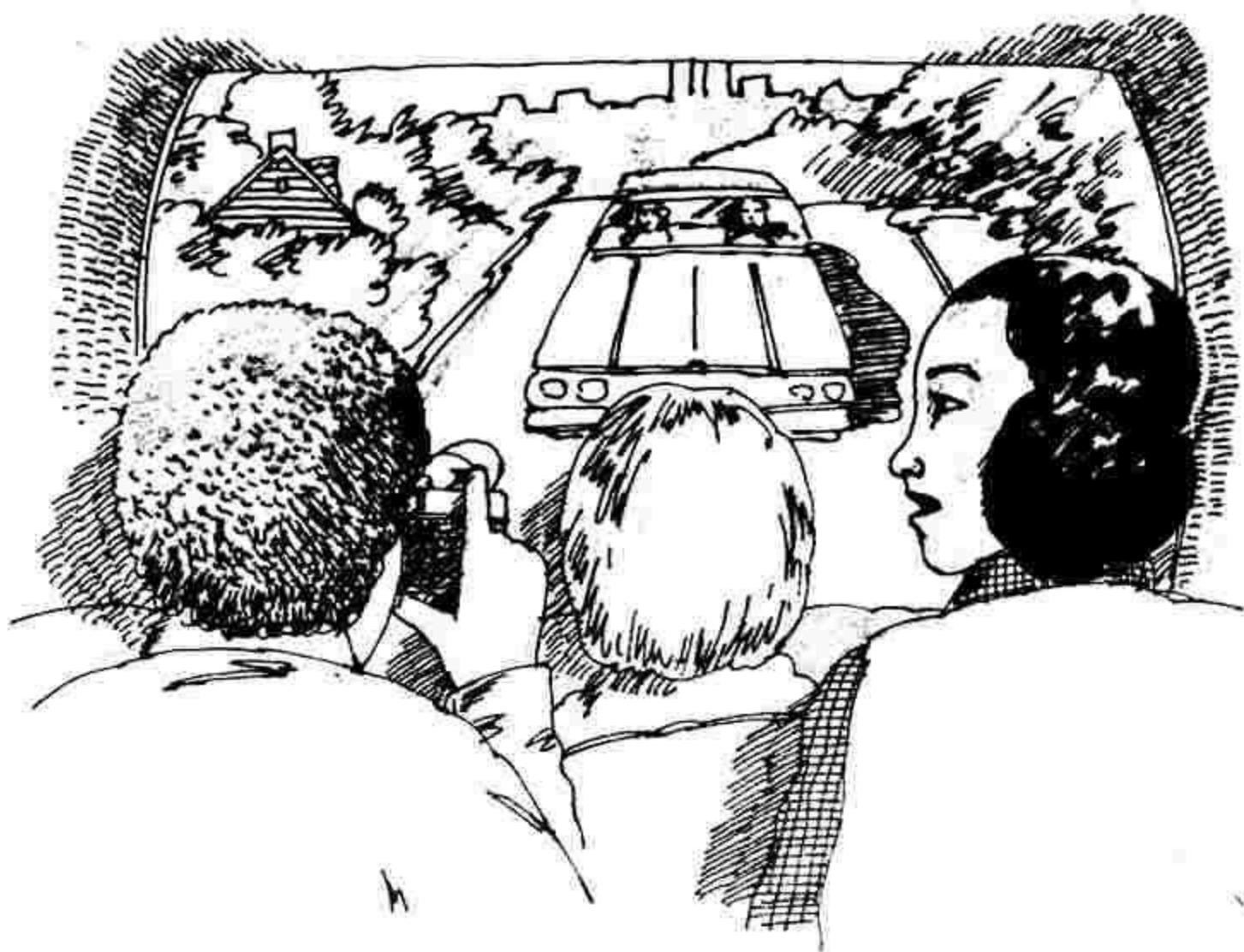
"Ricardo," Vikki said, "think you'll have enough light to grab pictures of whatever is going to happen?"

"Plenty. If the smugglers are on time. But just in case, I loaded the camera with fast film."

Zach shifted his eyes from the rear window. "You know how in movies someone jumps in a taxi and says 'Follow that car'?"

"Yeah," Ricardo answered with complete disinterest.

"Have you ever heard anyone say 'Follow that bus'?"



"What are you talking about?"

"There's a tan Chevy tailing this bus."

Vikki and Ricardo spun around to peer out through the back window.

"See it?" Zach asked. "Following about a block behind. I think it's been trailing along ever since we left town."

"Looks like two people in the front seat," Vikki said. "Can you make them out? Wish we had binoculars."

"We don't need binoculars." Quickly

Ricardo dug the camera out of his bag and set about changing lenses.

"What are you doing?" Vikki asked.

"Putting the telephoto back on. I can zoom them up almost close enough to touch."

He aimed the camera through the window and carefully turned the barrel of the lens. Then he stopped, squinting through the viewer with one eye. He let out a slow whistle.

"Do we know them?" Vikki asked.

"The man at the wheel—never saw him before. But guess who's sitting beside him?"

"Let's skip the guessing games, Ricky," Vikki said. "Who?"

"Yup. There she is, all right. In perfect focus."

"*Who?*"

"Mrs. Frimple."

CHAPTER 7

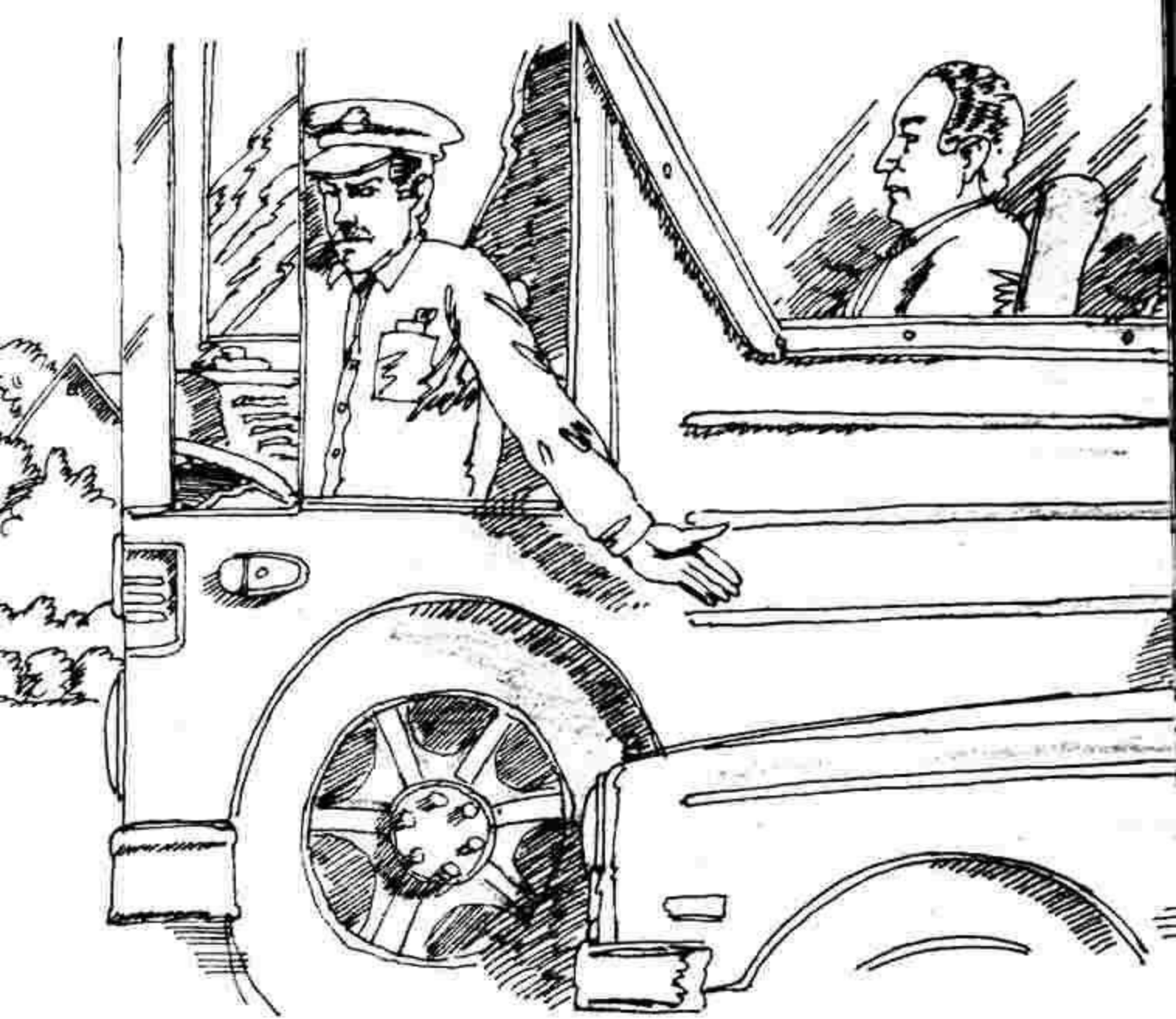
Tennessee Bay

Ricardo arched an eyebrow. "How are we going to give her the slip in broad daylight?"

The bus made another stop to let passengers off and on.

"Maybe we can fake her out," Vikki said, rising. "Come on. We'll walk down the aisle as if we were getting off."

The Bloodhound Gang rose, but partway down the aisle Vikki motioned to duck down and keep out of sight. Scurrying like crabs, the three detectives returned to the back-seat area. The other passengers turned their heads, but Vikki couldn't



concern herself with their puzzled stares.

The Bloodhound Gang remained slumped out of sight from the rear window through several more stops. At one point the bus driver motioned a car to pass on the narrow road. Vikki dug out her pocket mirror and caught a glimpse of the car.

"Tan Chevy?" Zach asked.



"You guessed it," Vikki answered. "They must be checking the passengers for us as they drive past the bus. Stay down. They'll be turning back if they figure we managed to slip out at an earlier stop."

It was almost half an hour before the bus approached Tennessee Bay. Ricardo rose slowly and risked a backward glance.

"All clear." He smiled. "Vikki, we sure gave them a lot of busywork. Now they're doubling back on our trail."

Vikki replied with a playful smile, "Why, I just feel terrible about it!"

The Bloodhound Gang straightened up. The bus was slowing. A road sign announced:

TENNESSEE BAY CITY

Population 47

"A regular boom town," Ricardo said.

The bus pulled into the city—a gas station, a grocery store, a café, and a shack with a "For Rent" sign in the window.

No one got off the bus—except the Bloodhound Gang.

The bay was a mud flat about a mile across. It had an abandoned look, as if the tide had gone out and forgotten to come back.

The Bloodhound Gang scouted along a

dirt road and then cut off into a patch of tall, dry grass to hide. And wait.

Peering through the telephoto lens, Ricardo began studying the mud flat and the ocean beyond.

"What time is it?" Zach asked. "I'm getting hungry."

Vikki checked her watch. "It's . . . seventeen-twenty hours."

"We should have stopped in that café for something to eat," Zach said.

"That's about the first place Mrs. Frimple would ask about us."

Ricardo lowered the camera. "Vikki, I think we're in the wrong place."

"You like the grass over there better?"

"This bay is so shallow, you'd have to dig to find water. Smugglers couldn't even get a rowboat across."

Vikki shook her head. "This has *got* to be the right place."

Twenty minutes later they suddenly heard a rustling in the weeds behind them.



"Looks cozy," came a voice. "Is there room for one more? And anyone hungry?"

The voice was young and joyous. The figure was old and familiar.

"Mrs. Frimple," Vikki gasped.

"Not exactly." The woman set down a wooden box and a grocery bag. Then she whipped off a gray wig and shook out her own honey-colored hair. She pulled off the steel-rimmed glasses and unbuttoned the shabby sweater to reveal a police badge.

"Police Detective Monroe," she declared, and smiled. "How do I look?"

"Fifty years younger," said Vikki.

"How'd you find us?" Zach blurted out.

"My partner and I figured you'd spotted us. So we drove on ahead. I took the wheel and he got out and caught the bus. He saw you get off here at Tennessee Bay. Once you were out of sight, he left the bus too—and then flagged me down. I'd have been here sooner, but I stopped to have

some sandwiches made up. You have your choice of ham and cheese, tuna fish, peanut butter, or egg salad."

"Peanut butter," Zach said quickly, while there was still a choice.

"But why were you shadowing us?" Ricardo exclaimed.

The police officer grinned. "If you were clever enough to switch the message, I figured you'd be clever enough to lead us to the secret location."

"How did you happen to have the message in the first place?" Vikki asked.

"I worked myself into Mr. Big's organization. Undercover. I got lucky and was able to intercept the message. Somehow they got wise and came after me. That's when the creep in the park snatched my purse. But you came along in the nick of time."

"Speaking of the creep," Ricardo said, "here's a picture of him."

Detective Monroe glanced at the photograph and her eyes lit up. "Rembrandt

couldn't have done better. Terrific. We'll pick him up right away."

"But why did you come to the office and deny you'd been kidnapped?" Vikki asked.

"For your own good. I thought once I had the message back, you'd be better off out of the case. But when the message you slipped me turned up blank, I knew you'd broken the code. And I practically ran into Mr. Big as I left your building. So I knew you were in danger. It was then my partner and I decided to keep an eye on you."

"How did you escape from his goons?" Zach put in.

Detective Monroe laughed. "Who expects judo chops from a little old lady?"

"Seems like you should have shadowed Mr. Big instead of us," Ricardo said.

"Oh, we've tried that. A man like Mr. Big grows eyes in the back of his head. Every time we put a tail on him, he leads us on a wild-goose chase. But we've got a chance to catch him red-handed this time. My part-

ner is staked out up the road. What time is the boat due?"

"In a couple of hours . . . seven-thirty—I mean, nineteen-thirty hours," Ricardo replied. "But look at that mud. No boat could get through that."

"Just the sort of spot these smugglers always pick out. We've known for some time that Mr. Big's interest in model airplanes is just a front. His Ace Model Airplane shop always has a 'Closed' sign on it." She pointed to the wooden box she'd carried into the grass. "Exactly why I brought that along. Now, let's eat."

CHAPTER 8

Good-bye, Mr. Big

The waiting was over.

At 1923 hours a fishing boat nosed into view outside the bay.

"It's dropping anchor," Ricardo said, zooming the camera lens in on it.

"Can you make out its name?" Detective Monroe asked.

Ricardo squinted at the lettering along the bow. He snapped a picture and rewound the camera. "*The Flying Ace.*"

"Mr. Big has more aces up his sleeve than a cardsharp," said Detective Monroe, opening up the wooden case. "We'd like any film you shoot. It'll look good in court."

She withdrew a set of earphones from her bag. The box she had brought contained a radio receiver and transmitter.

Moments later Zach exclaimed, "Hey—listen!"

A distant whine floated in the air, sounding like an angry hornet approaching from the sea.

It was exactly 1930 hours.

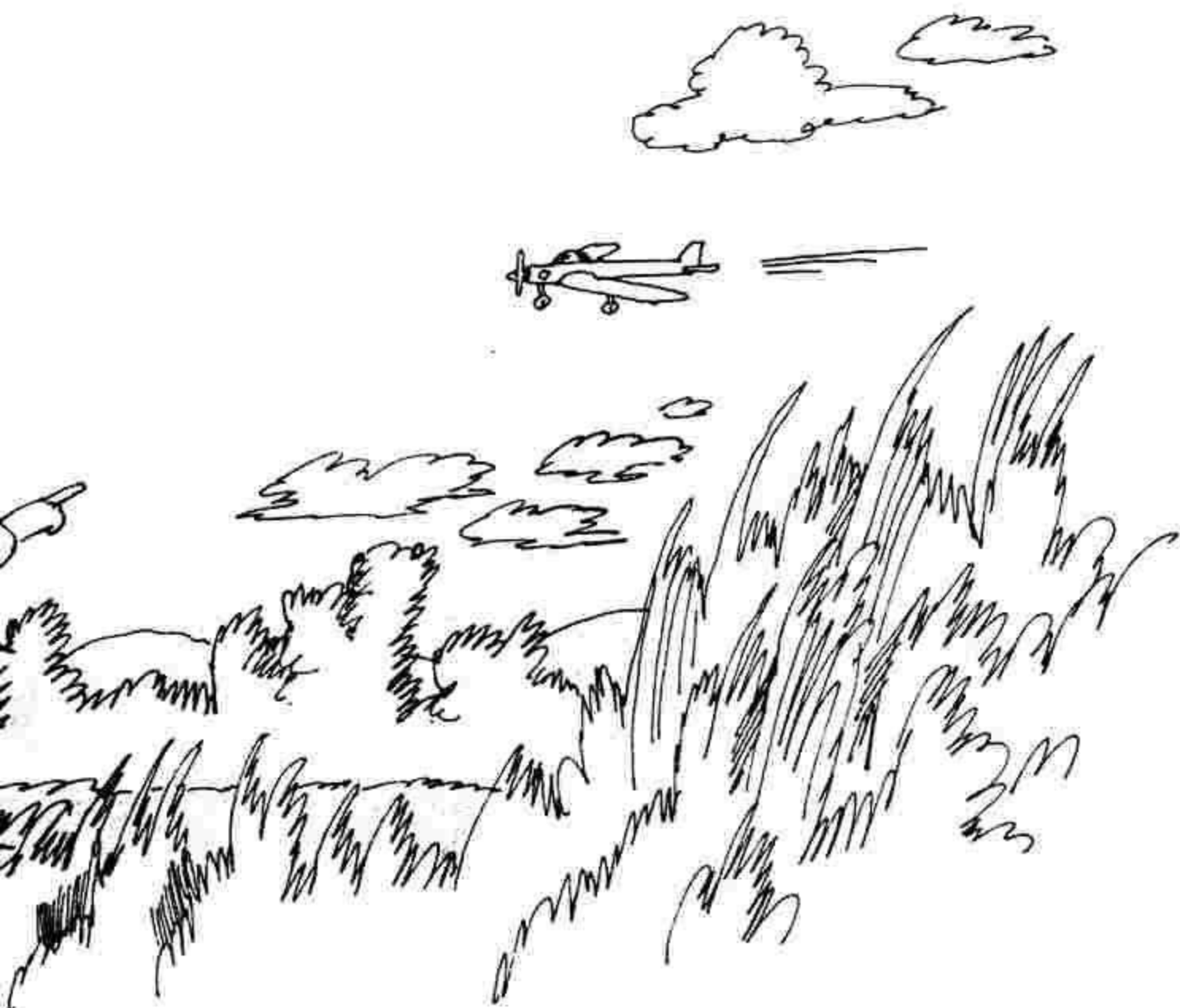
Quickly the whine became a popping roar as it drew nearer.

"It's coming in over the mud flat," Vikki exclaimed. "Over there! I can see it."



“So can I,” said Ricardo, trying to focus his camera. “A model airplane . . . with a gas-powered motor.”

“And radio-controlled,” added Detective Monroe, slipping on the earphones. “Now all I’ve got to do is find the radio frequency they’re using to guide the plane.”



"It's landing at the other end of the bay," Zach declared, pointing through the grass.

"Here comes another one!" said Ricardo, panning his camera back toward the fishing boat.

Detective Monroe, rotating the dials on the receiver, broke into a sudden smile. "Got their frequency. Now to beam our own signal."

She set the dials on the transmitter. "Can you see that second plane?"

"I'm right on it," Ricardo answered, peering through the camera.

"Anything happening?"

Ricardo was hardly breathing. Then he said, "It's turning this way. Coming right for us!"

"Terrific." The police officer was smiling. "Now it's following *our* radio signal."

"And coming in for a landing!" Zach added.

The model airplane roared in low over the mud flat and touched down roughly. It

bounced along the ground and disappeared into a clump of grass.

The Bloodhound Gang and Detective Monroe left their hiding place and chased down the plane. It seemed to have disappeared. The motor had stalled out.

Zach dove through the grass and reappeared with the model plane in his hand.

"It's a B-52," he said.

"Never mind what it is," Vikki declared. "Is there something in it?"

"There must be," said Detective Monroe. "Smuggled goods launched from the fishing boat out there. I'll radio the Coast Guard as soon as we know what we've got."

"What we've got," said Vikki, discovering a silk pouch taped inside the plane's cargo hatch, "is something very small." She opened the pouch and poured the contents into her hand for all to see. "Diamonds."

A dark limousine came crashing through the weeds and screeched to a halt. The doors flew open, and out jumped Knuck-



les. He spread his big hands out like claws.

"Don't move!" he commanded.

Then Mr. Big appeared through the cloud of dust raised by the car's sudden stop. He planted his feet far apart and smiled.

"Hijacking model airplanes," he said, "Tsk, tsk, tsk."

And Detective Monroe replied, "Smug-



gling diamonds. Tsk, tsk, tsk. Sir, you are under arrest."

Mr. Big laughed. "Says who?"

Another figure took shape through the dust, a solidly built man who dropped Knuckles with a karate chop.

"Says me," he said. "Detective Flint. And now for a little police jewelry. Hands behind your back, Mr. Big, unless you want

to hear bird song like your pal Knuckles.”

By 1944 hours the two criminals were fitted out with gleaming police jewelry—handcuffs.

“Thanks for the assist, Bloodhound Gang,” said Detective Monroe. “Good work. Super. Terrific. I’d say everything came up . . . Aces.”

Sid Fleischman, well-known for his adventurous, humorous stories and his very lively characters, is the author of over two dozen books for children. Born in New York, he grew up in San Diego. He has been a professional magician* and a newspaper reporter.

He is the recipient of many awards, including the Golden Kite Award, the Mark Twain Award, and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. *Jingo Django* (1971) was an ALA Notable Book. Today Mr. Fleischman writes motion-picture and television scripts including the *Bloodhound Gang* mysteries he created for *3-2-1 Contact*, the science series produced by Children's Television Workshop.

Sid Fleischman lives in Santa Monica, a beach town near Los Angeles.

*Mr. Fleischman still dabbles in magic. He has sawed some of his best friends in half . . . and then put them back together!

The message that everyone's after!

"See that?" asked Vikki. A message written with invisible ink was beginning to appear on the piece of white paper. But when Ricardo and Zach looked closely, they saw the message was in code.

Cracking the code is only the first problem for the three detectives. Mr. Big, a well-known crook, wants that coded message. So does frail Mrs. Frimple, a sweet old lady with some secrets of her own.

Why do they want the secret message? What does it say? The Bloodhound Gang sets out to find the answers—and runs smack into big-time trouble!

Readers love the first Bloodhound Gang books, *The Case of Princess Tomorrow* and *The Case of the Cackling Ghost*!

"A neatly worked out plot is based on simple, believable gimmicks. . . . Fast reading, large print, and pleasing illustrations."
—*Booklist*

"... well-plotted, action-packed, and full of deceptive clues."
—*Chicago Sun-Times*

This Bloodhound Gang Book, an easy-to-read mystery, is based on the popular *Bloodhound Gang* series that is part of the 3-2-1 *Contact* television show, and was created by Random House, Inc., in cooperation with the Children's Television Workshop. Children do not have to watch 3-2-1 *Contact* to benefit from this book. Children's Television Workshop will use revenues from the Bloodhound Gang Books to help support Children's Television Workshop's educational projects.

Random House/Children's Television Workshop

\$1.50

394-84764-4